

THE ART OF GEORGE CATLIN.

BY EDWIN SWIFT BALCH.

(Read April 19, 1918.)

Within the past decade, a number of American painters have transferred their Lares and Penates from Europe and the eastern United States to Arizona and New Mexico. They have done this because it has dawned on them that the American Indian of the southwestern states offers a splendid opportunity to put on canvas subjects virgin in form and color. About a dozen pictures of Arizona and New Mexico Indians by these painters were in this year's exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. The aim of these painters is undoubtedly artistic, but their works have an important scientific attribute, namely that they record ethnological subjects and in time will form a grand series of illustrations of the appearance and the customs of a few tribes of the original inhabitants of America. About this movement, Mr. Edgar L. Hewett, Director of the School of American Research, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, on the 4th of January last, gave a most interesting account to the American Philosophical Society.

But this movement, important as it is, can do only certain things. The artists of to-day can perpetuate from actual observation only the Indians of to-day. In the United States, they can record the appearance and the doings of the Indians of the desiccated regions of the southwest, whom one may call generically the Pueblo Indians; and even those Indians have had their costume affected by that of the White Race. But they cannot record the historical Neolithic Indian. For the Indian of the Allegheny forest, of the Plains, and of the Rocky Mountains, the Indian of the deer, the bison and the grizzly bear horizon, is a thing of the past. In his genuine native trappings, he can never be painted again.

Fortunately for ethnology and for the history of the natives of America, a handful of painters of by-gone days have left us some

drawings and paintings which form a precious record of our copper-colored predecessors before they had become largely Europeanized. A number of these paintings are in the United States National Museum in Washington, a number are in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, a few are in the Harvard University Peabody Museum and others are scattered throughout the country. Many of these paintings are portraits, usually not of any great art merit. As works of art they will doubtless be greatly surpassed by some of the pictures now being painted. But as ethnological data they are exceedingly important and will always hold their own.

One of these painters of Indians was J. O. Lewis, who painted a good many portraits of chiefs of various tribes, Sioux, Winnebagoes, Chippewas, etc., and who published a portfolio of colored lithographs of them.¹ Many of his models were garbed in a hybrid European dress and the lithographs are too poor to render accurately the heads.

Another painter of Indian portraits was C. B. King. Some of his paintings were reproduced by colored lithography in McKenney's and Hall's book² and historically they are of importance. The frontispiece of the book by P. Rinetisbacher (in text Rhinedesbacher) is an interesting picture of an Indian dance.

One amateur artist who portrayed sporadically Indians was Captain Sully, U. S. A., son of the portrait painter Thomas Sully. In a lecture before the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, on January 14, 1918, Mr. Henry Budd stated that Captain Sully while on frontier duty made some sketches of Indian life.

Captain S. Eastman, U. S. A., made a number of drawings of Indian scenes, which were engraved for Schoolcraft's great work.³ Some of these were from his own sketches, apparently made while he was on active service along the frontier. But some of his drawings were from sketches by other persons, Schoolcraft himself, Lt.

¹ J. O. Lewis, "The Aboriginal Portfolio," Philadelphia, 1835.

² Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, "History of the Indian Tribes of North America," Philadelphia, 1836, 1842, 1844.

³ Henry R. Schoolcraft, "Historical . . . Information . . . Respecting the History . . . of the Indian Tribes," etc. Illustrated by S. Eastman, Capt. U. S. A., Philadelphia, 1851.

Col. J. H. Eaton, U. S. A., R. H. Kern, Esq., etc. It is not surprising therefore that the engravings are somewhat monotonous in handling and lack to some extent realistic detail. The drawings doubtless were much better than the reproductions, but these nevertheless have saved a great deal which has now passed away of the life of the American Indians and Eastman's work will remain a permanent contribution to American Ethnology.

But by all odds the most important of all painters of the American Indians is George Catlin. Catlin was a man of many activities: a great traveler and something of an explorer, an ethnologist, a geologist, a voluminous writer, but above all a painter. About his travels and his views on geology and ethnology, his own writings offer all necessary data to a student; of his art, numerous engraved reproductions are accessible. But of his art, from a painter's point of view, and of his rank as an artist, no critical study, to my knowledge, has yet been made. And to fill this lacuna by a technical examination of the paintings of this remarkable man is the object of this paper, which although it appears in my name, is really a case of joint authorship. For my wife studied the Catlin pictures in New York and Washington with me and many of the observations and ideas here presented are hers.

I had the pleasure of meeting Catlin on one occasion many years ago in Europe, I think in 1871. He was then traveling about exhibiting his collection of pictures. I went to see these and was lucky enough to find him in the gallery where they were and to have a long talk with him, and I remember him as a most interesting and friendly old man, who loomed up to my boyish eyes as a hero.

Catlin was born in 1796 in the Wyoming Valley, Pennsylvania. His boyhood was passed principally in hunting and fishing. When he grew up he studied law, but soon grew tired of this and went to Philadelphia, where he started as a painter, without teacher or adviser. After several years, one day a delegation of Indians from the "Far West," arrayed in their native dress, happened to pass through the city, and this event determined the course of Catlin's life. He dreamed of nothing but painting Indians and he carried out his dream.

He started in 1832 and wandered all over the plains as far as the Rocky Mountains, living with the Indians for nine or ten years and all the while painting their portraits and making pictures of all the different phases of their life. For some years after this he was occupied in exhibiting these pictures in America and Europe, and also in writing and publishing several important books.⁴ In the "fifties" he traveled extensively in South America, principally in the regions of the Orinoco and the lower Amazon, where his brush once more was ceaselessly busy. After this again he wrote numerous valuable contributions to the knowledge of the Indians of North America and South America and also traveled about exhibiting his collection. After his death, the greater part of his pictures fortunately passed into the possession of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

Almost all of the hundreds of pictures painted by Catlin are of the same size, about 19 by 25 inches. Almost all are painted lengthwise, not upright. In his more elaborate compositions he covered the entire surface. But in many cases he painted an oval picture, which he framed with a black line. He may have used the oval shape because he recognized either consciously or unconsciously that the eyes do really see an oval rather than a rectangle; or because he thereby avoided certain difficulties in filling corners; or he may have found that the oval shape sometimes assisted the composition;

⁴ Catlin's most important publications are as follows:

"Catlin's North American Indian Portfolio," London, 1844.

"Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians," New York, 1844.

"Illustrations of the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians," London, 1845-1848.

"Life Amongst the Indians," 1861.

"Illustrations of the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians," London, 1866.

"Last Rambles amongst the Indians of the Rocky Mountains and the Andes," New York, 1867.

"O-Kee-Pa: a Religious Ceremony and other Customs of the Mandans," Philadelphia, 1867.

"Catlin's Notes of Eight Years' Travel and Residence in Europe," New York, 1867.

"North and South American Indians. Catalogue," etc., New York, Baker and Godwin, 1871.

or in some cases he may have saved time which in painting at high speed in the wilds must frequently have been precious.

Most of Catlin's pictures are on prepared paper of a light grayish brown, which often helps a good deal as an undercolor, occasionally remaining untouched. The pictures, as a rule, are light but not bright in tone; there are few brilliant lights and few deep darks; they are usually in a high middle, somewhat dull, register.

Catlin's palette is limited but complete. All the essential colors are on it. The bright colors are used most sparingly and only in small touches and accents. There is certainly white lead. Yellow ochre is much used. A little bright yellow, which may be Naples yellow. Light red. A few touches of two bright reds, almost surely vermilion and rose madder. One bright blue, which almost certainly is cobalt. In one or two cases, in night effects, there seems to be some darker blue, possibly indigo. Brown, probably Vandyke and umber, is a good deal used. Black is occasionally employed and sometimes in night effects pure or nearly pure. There is much dull, usually light green in Catlin's pictures: this may well be a mixture rather than a pure pigment.

The method of Catlin in laying on the paint is of interest. The paint is thin and smooth. It is all applied evenly in one thin coat without retouches. There is no impasto; there are no *repentirs*. His work might almost be called tinted drawing rather than painting. There are two explanations of this mode of work. One of them is that it was to a great extent the method then in use. The painters covered their canvas with a slick surface of paint, from which all roughnesses and ridges were removed. The other cause probably is the great difficulty Catlin must have had in carrying materials and paints with him. He must have opened his colors on his palette in the smallest possible amounts, and made every speck of paint do as much covering as possible.

One of the curiosities of the Catlin collections at Washington and at New York, is that there are no sketch books, no rough drawings, no slips of paper with pencil or chalk marks or blots of water color. Catlin does speak in connection with his first bison hunt, of making drawings of an old bull from his horse in his sketch book, and in another place he writes of altering the finished portrait of a

dissatisfied Indian with water colors; but no such sketches in either pencil or water color, as far as I know, have come down to us. All his works are small finished pictures, which Catlin carried as far forward as he knew how. And considering how well understood his pictures are as a whole, it is astonishing how much detail he gets into his figures and their accessories. But while this multiplicity of detail always takes its position in the whole, as a result his pictures do not carry any great distance; they are best looked at close by. Some of his detail is minute and delicate. Details on the dresses in his portraits are beautifully carried out; there is the greatest delicacy of touch. And it is of ethnographic significance that all the decorations he depicts on the clothing of the figures or on the teepees are always square or rectangular decorations, such as one sees on the Lewis and Clarke skin robe in the Harvard University Museum.

Catlin drew well; not academically but accurately. His portrait heads and full-length portraits may be ranked as fair examples of the style of portraiture in vogue in America in the first half of the nineteenth century. Had he continued painting portraits at home he would doubtless have earned a comfortable competency. And while, of course, Catlin never painted any pictures of architecture requiring linear perspective, his pictures always have the correct artistic perspective which all good landscape painters obtain through intelligent drawing.

A strong point of Catlin is his splendid sense of proportions. He got the natural proportions of figures. His figures are utterly unacademic. He was not preoccupied with Greek or modern European conventional canons of what a human should be. His nudes are nudes, the real thing; they have much the feeling of the French primitives of the Middle Ages. Catlin merely tried successfully to make humans look like what they are, and one feels that nobody looked over his shoulder and told him he was not right.

While all of Catlin's models are copper-colored with straight black hair and sometimes are daubed over with red ochre or other colored earth, nevertheless there are two variations in type. One of these, which is most apparent in the portraits, has features very similar to the Americanized European whose ancestors came over

early in Colonial times and this type resembles the thin gaunt American type of to-day. The other type, which is most apparent in the incident pictures, resembles the Mongol type, both in the faces and in the figures, which are decidedly squat. The latter type often suggests the faces in Aztec or Maya art. Mr. Huntington Wilson, former assistant Secretary of State, tells me that he observed two types among the Indians of South America, one on the high Andes, the other in the hot forest lowlands east of the Andes. Apparently Catlin observed something of the kind among the Indians of the Northern Plains.

Color and also values, that is light and shade, Catlin gets very realistically. He never attempted to solve any artistic problem in color nor in light and shade; he simply painted his subjects straightforwardly and quickly as well as he could. He was absolutely sincere in trying to render what he saw. In the real sense of the word, therefore, his works are genuine realistic impressions. But they have not a semblance of so-called impressionism. His lines, values and colors are always an attempt to present as nearly as he could a scene in nature. His color is sober. Evidently he thought much of local color and little of artistic color schemes. There is no decorative quality in his work. The true function of decorative painting is to make patterns of lines and patches of colors into decorations, not to represent or imitate nature. And there are no line patterns nor patches of color work in any of Catlin's pictures. What he does get in his coloring is a most remarkably faithful rendition of the colors of nature.

The accurate rendition of the colors of nature is shown forcibly in some of Catlin's pictures of South American forests. In them he shows great nerve in tackling the, from our usual pictorial standpoint, utterly unpictorial subjects of the swamps and jungles, whose color might be called a vegetable green monochrome. He suggests the soggiess, the pestilential malarial character of these South American swamps in a wonderful way. His forests give the impression of forests, his trees really look like trees in a forest, much more so than does much of the more learned work of the later European painters, then for instance, the forests of some of the Barbizon men or of some of the impressionists. And he succeeds,

largely because he is not afraid of covering a canvas with a mass of green, and because that green does imitate closely the color of a mass of green leaves.

Values Catlin always tried for and usually got very fairly. It is partly because his numerous detail is in value and stays in place that he gives the impression of simplicity and a look of out of doors. He often suggests most successfully distance and atmosphere, as for instance in a picture, now in the American Museum, of some snow mountains, probably the Andes, in which the mountains seem miles away. Some of his skies also, especially at sunrise and sunset, have not only color and light, but most delicate values. To *chiaroscuro*, that is to an artistic arrangement of light and shade or values, he paid less heed. He sought values and sometimes obtained arrangements of light and shade which are most artistic, but it seems always as if it were the subject which bore them in itself, rather than that he was searching for them.

While there is little striving after effect in Catlin's work, still sometimes he painted some memory effects most successfully. Among his *œuvre* are a certain number of night effects, forerunners of our modern nocturnes but not just a dark blue smudge like some of these. They are painted with a generous use of black. There is lots of detail in them: the more you look into them the more you see. Two of these nocturnes in the American Museum may be instanced. One is a camp fire under pine trees which is excellent in composition and in which the pine trees are really drawn. The other is a South American river with some men standing over a lot of captured turtles and a number of women running up waving torches with the most splendid action and motion.

Evidently an inborn gift for composition was one of Catlin's artistic attributes, for he received as little outside artistic influence as any painter ever did, yet each of his pictures shows a distinct power of composing every subject. He had the dramatic instinct, he knew how to place on canvas a scene he had observed so as to make it into a picture. In some of his works, he renders the appearance of a crowd, of a multitude of animated beings, whether Indians, or bison, or peccaries, in a way few painters have done. In his pictures of Indian games, one feels as if there were hundreds

of Indians before one; in his bison hunts, the bison herds stream over the prairies by the thousand. It is largely Catlin's power of composition and selection which makes these pictures successful; indeed almost invariably his pictures have good composition, and sometimes they have really splendid composition.

Obviously many of Catlin's pictures are memory paintings of incidents freshly observed. His bison hunts, his groups of Indians in games, in fact all his scenes of active wild life, must have been painted on the spot, as soon as seen and in their natural environment, but they could only have been done from memory, as usually they represent many figures or animals, generally in violent motion. Evidently Catlin had a strong artistic memory and it was that quality which enabled him to get so much life in his work. For his humans and animals have both action and motion: they are alive, they stand plumb on their feet, they walk, they run, they jump: they have none of the arrested motion of certain academic work. His groups of figures render the movements of the groups; you feel the way each group is moving. Except in his portraits, his humans are never posing. There is no rigidity in his work. His one weak spot in regard to motion is that he painted some of his galloping horses and bison with the incorrect open-scissor action which no white race man ever discovered was wrong, until instantaneous photography obliterated it from art.

It is the matter and not the manner of Catlin's pictures, however, which is of supreme importance. The paramount value of his pictures lies in the subjects and in the fact that the subjects are handled realistically. His pictures are extremely original through their subjects and they are absolutely individual because the subjects appealed to Catlin and were motives to him. There is nothing idealistic about his pictures; they are not imaginative; they are pure realism. His Indians are not the Indians of romance nor of the warped mentality of hostile whites; his Indians are the real thing.

Catlin is a great illustrator-painter. He painted endless incidents of the life of the American natives realistically and accurately. He painted his pictures of the wild Indians while actually living among them, with the scenes which he was painting, the real history of the Indians, actually being enacted before him. And the result is that

Catlin, as no other artist, makes the Indians a part of their surroundings, a part of the wild life of the plains, of the forests, of nature; he makes them a living part of their environment. His pictures place before us the Indians in the chase, in the dance, in the tepee, in fact in all the incidents of life. He shows us in an unexcelled way how people who lived by hunting with stone weapons obtained their livelihood; and he makes it clear that killing bisons and grizzly bears was anything but child's play to a man armed with a stick tipped with a pointed stone.

Catlin looked at the Indians with a friendly eye. He lived with them for years, he admired them as models and as characters, indeed one might say that he loved them. The usual idea that the Indian is a lazy, good-for-nothing individual, who lets his squaw work and slave for him, is really a libel and is dispelled by Catlin. It is formed from the Indians on reservations, who received their beef and blankets from government agents. When the Indian was corralled and the bison exterminated, the Indian's occupation was gone. The real Indian provided meat and skins for his family; food and the materials for clothing and teepees. To obtain meat and skins from deer, bison and grizzlies with a flint-headed arrow was enough for any man; it took his time and strength. When he hunted day after day and week after week and year after year, in good and bad weather, in sunshine and sleet, in cold and heat, he considered and he considered rightly, that he was entitled to have his food and his clothing prepared for him at home. He did not go downtown to deal in finance, nor did he stand up in a store to sell millinery, but in his native conditions he was just as much a business man as any American of to-day, and just as much entitled to find a good dinner at home in the evening with his dress clothes laid out nicely brushed, as our hardest worked lawyer or physician.

It is a godsend for the history of the American Indians that Catlin was never taught to draw, that he lacked the opportunity of studying and learning to paint like everyone else. If he had been trained in the schools of the day, probably he would have developed the what might be termed rather grandiloquent style of some of the so-called Hudson river school. Fortunately he did not. For as a result of being self-taught and of living most of his life in the wilder-

ness, Catlin's painting is truly individual, it is unlike anyone else's, a sure test that he had real underlying art powers. His pictures are not founded on tradition and therefore perhaps have a certain primitive look; indeed Catlin more than any American might be called a primitive. The painters of to-day would not see things as Catlin did; they are too learned. And from the standpoint of modern art some phases of his work would be called bad, and yet it is probably accurate to say it is partly those very *naïvetés* which make it so good.

Catlin's position among artists is unique. He devoted his life, with almost no pecuniary reward, to delineating the deeds and the artistic beauties of a vanishing race. His pictures are the great record of our displaced predecessors. His incident pictures are painted directly on the spot, either from the Indians posing for him or from memory immediately afterwards. He painted hundreds of such incident pictures from occurrences he actually saw. No one else has done anything of the kind except most sporadically. No one could do it now. For all these scenes have disappeared from the face of the earth. Anyone in the future, artist or layman, who wants to see how our Indians, untouched by white civilization, actually lived and appeared, must turn to Catlin. In the coming centuries the Indians more and more will amalgamate and fuse with their conquerors and the more they do, the greater value will scientists attach to the wonderful records which Catlin has left of the copper-colored men who once ranged and roamed in wild and unrestrained liberty from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego.